

A Season of Catholic Social Teaching

St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore

January 2021: Family, Community, and Participation

This is the fourth month that St. Vincent's parish will reflect on the principles of [Catholic Social Teaching](#). As we begin this new year, we will explore the principle of **Family, Community, and Participation**.

While several of the CST principles focus on human dignity and human rights, the encyclicals that build this principle help us to understand that the person is not only sacred but also social. Full human potential is not realized in solitude but rather can only be fully realized and protected in mutual relationships when we live in community with others. The teachings make real and tangible the link between family, community, society, and the state and the roles and responsibilities of each in protecting rights, securing justice for all and achieving the common good.

Family is the most central aspect of community that we have in our lives.

We learn the values at the feet of those who raise us. They provide the love and guidance which allow us to grow into confident, responsible adults. They teach us to put the needs of others before our own needs. We learn the importance of forgiving and the importance of accepting forgiveness. We learn that we will survive our mistakes. We learn that love is more important than wealth and status. As adults, it is our duty to pass on these values to the next generation.

The theme of the [encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*](#) is that all of us are sisters and brothers. Pope Francis uses family as a metaphor, but he also has an expansive understanding of the meaning of family. Paragraph 230 states:

Working to overcome our divisions without losing our identity as individuals presumes that a basic sense of belonging is present in everyone. Indeed, "society benefits when each person and social group feels truly at home. In a family, parents, grandparents and children all feel

at home; no one is excluded. If someone has a problem, even a serious one, even if he brought it upon himself, the rest of the family comes to his assistance; they support him. His problems are theirs... In families, everyone contributes to the common purpose; everyone works for the common good, not denying each person's individuality but encouraging and supporting it. They may quarrel, but there is something that does not change: the family bond. Family disputes are always resolved afterwards. The joys and sorrows of each of its members are felt by all. That is what it means to be a family!"

It is time to dispel the myth that families were not always as complicated as they are today. There have always been multi-generational households. Premature death, illness and injuries to young parents were more common in the past than they are now. Desertion, abuse, addiction, mental illness, and imprisonment are not new problems. There have always been single parent households. Sometimes these problems produced nothing but suffering.

More often, families opened up, and took in friends, relatives, and even people they barely knew. My mother was orphaned at fifteen. She and her two brothers were taken in by neighbors. Some of us were raised by our parents. Others were raised by grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings, friends, neighbors, or strangers who saw a need and met it.

All of these groupings are families: families that can promote our Christian values and are evidence of what love can do. In paragraph 62 of *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis writes:

For "love shatters the chains that keep us isolated and separate; in their place, it builds bridges. Love enables us to create one great family, where all of us can feel at home... Love exudes compassion and dignity."

Catholics have no monopoly on the virtues we teach. What may be unique is that the teachings of the Church tell us that [How we organize our society](#) -- in economics and politics, in law and policy -- directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. There is an essential link

between family, community and the common good. We believe people have a right and a duty to [participate in society](#), seeking together the well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

Catholics need to be leaders in our community, and to hold political authority accountable for its primary function to protect human rights, secure justice for all and ensure that every individual can participate and contribute to the common good.

The values we believe in benefit all of society. I am not bashful about preaching selflessness, charity, forgiveness, forbearance, hard work and responsibility. We need to promote these virtues in the public square. We must not allow our public dialogue to be dominated by selfishness, materialism and decadence.

In her [November reflection](#) on the **Option for the Poor and Vulnerable**, parishioner Peggy Meyer noted that none of the seven principles of Catholic Social Teaching stand alone. They weave in and out of each other. As Pope Francis expands our understanding of family values, they are indeed the foundation for implementing all seven principles.

We are each other's sisters and brothers.

Jim Casey